

PERSPECTIVES ON THE RECENT GOD-LANGUAGE DEBATE

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Questions about God-language have been a focus of debate in UM circles for the last several years. Disagreements over this issue were central to the decision to “receive,” rather than “accept,” the report on “Words that Hurt, Words that Heal” at the 1984 General Conference. They flared again in the consideration of the new *Book of Worship* leading up to the 1992 General Conference. No group has felt the tensions resulting from this debate more than seminaries and the many women and men preparing for future pastoral leadership. Seminaries have proven to be as liable as any public arena for becoming the battlegrounds for competing “PC-agendas” (politically correct versus politically conservative). This has even occasionally reached the point of attempts—on both ends of the spectrum—to mandate “proper” imagery and titles to be used for God in coursework and public forums.

As if negotiating this mine-field were not enough, many seminarians are also active in leading congregational worship. They quickly become aware that the issues and strong feelings involved in this debate are ever present in the decisions they must continually make about liturgy, Scripture translation, hymns, sermon illustrations, and so on. In the context of tensions such as these it is tempting to opt for simply whatever will create the least controversy. Yet, few of us can be happy with that recourse. We cannot lay aside concerns for accountability to biblical authority and our Wesleyan tradition so easily. But what guidance on this specific issue do these resources have to offer?

In previous reflections on closely related questions I became convinced that there were significant correlations between the Wesleyan tradition and the concern for more inclusive understandings of humanity and God (Maddox 1987b, 1991). I want to suggest now that this general resonance carries over to the issue of naming and imaging God. I will develop this suggestion by interrelating the concerns raised in two recent criticisms of any Christian use of female language for God (Frye & Leonard, et al.) with three defenses of inclusive God-language framed within evangelical and mainstream Christian contexts (Clanton, Hardesty, & Wren).

It should be noted at the outset that no major participant in the debates over God-language asserts that God is literally male. All recognize that such literalism would constitute idolatry as defined in Deut. 4:15–16. Yet, while conceding that God is “above” sex distinction, some want to argue that male language should be mandatory for *naming* or addressing God (especially “Father” for the First Person) and normative—if not exclusive—for *imaging* God.

The initial reason given for such preference of male language is the precedent and authority of Scripture. This point is usually made both in terms of the predominance of male imagery and titles for God in Scripture as a whole and in terms of Jesus’ purported unique preference for addressing God as “Father.” Several responses to this initial point must be made. First, the claim that Jesus’ address of God as Father was unique has been undercut. Such language for God was not uncommon in Jesus’ day (cf. Mattison). In reality, a more unique aspect of Jesus’ practice may have been his various female images for God. Second, a careful reading of Jesus’ actual use of Father-language suggests that a primary purpose was to contest the patriarchal assumptions about God and society common in his context (cf. Hamerton-Kelly & Minear). It is doubtful that an exclusive use of Father-language continues this purpose in our contemporary context. Third, it must not be overlooked that, despite the predominance of male imagery, Scripture itself includes female images for God—thereby warranting such usage. Finally, as Wesley recognized, some form of distinction between the essential Word of God and its expression in specific human language and cultures is necessary for interpreting Scripture, whatever one’s views on biblical authority. Differences over how to draw this distinction are central to the arguments over biblical teachings on women (cf. Maddox 1987a). In the same way, it must be questioned whether the predominance of male imagery for God in Scripture is an essential aspect of God’s special revelation or one of the limiting factors resulting from this revelation taking expression in fallen human settings. Those defending exclusive male naming of God argue that (patriarchal) biblical cultures were divinely sanctioned by the event of revelation. Those contesting the limitation to male language respond that Jesus’ rejection of patriarchalism demonstrates that this predominance is an expression of the

fallen context. I find the latter argument more persuasive, particularly because those who talk about God “sanctioning” biblical cultures are usually quite selective about the elements of those cultures that they wish to retain. For example, they will keep male headship and male-normative language but not monarchy or slavery. This appears simply arbitrary in light of their failure to provide any criteria for making such a selective endorsement of biblical cultures?

The appeal to a divinely sanctioned human expression of revelation leads directly to the second major issue in the contemporary God-language debate. Briefly put, the question is whether *all* human language about God, including biblical language, is ultimately metaphorical or analogical. It has long been recognized that words defined in human contexts must be “stretched” to apply to God. Does revelation provide us with any words to use for God that are not defined by their use in human contexts? Leonard argues that the name “Father” is one such word, given a unique definitive meaning by Jesus’ usage (p. 53). By contrast, the vast majority of theologians and biblical scholars would agree with G.B. Caird, who claims in *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (London, 1980) that essentially all language used in the Bible to refer to God is meta-phorical. Among those agreeing in principle with Caird would be the Wesleys, as shown by John’s endorsement of Peter Browne’s discussion of the analogical nature of God-language and by Charles’ prolific metaphorical imagery in his hymns. The point of this recognition is that one could not then make a strong contrast between Jesus’ Father-language and biblical female imagery, as Frye and Leonard desire. Both of these resources give authentic—but limited—disclosures of God’s nature.

On a third issue, those who oppose (much) use of female imagery for God argue that there is a theological reason that Scripture uses predominately male images for God. They contend that female images (especially Mother imagery) inevitably leads to a pantheistic identity of God and creation, due to the close connection between mother and child. One could question how this argument squares with modern biological awareness of the genetic contributions of both parents to the child. More importantly, the alternative view of God’s relation to the world which they advocate strikes me as more deistic than truly theistic. They place almost total emphasis on God’s transcendent sovereignty over creation. While such a sovereign monarch might appeal to some (classically in the Reformed tradition), Wesley said it made his “blood run cold”! In explicit contrast to such a view he championed understanding God as a loving Parent who is constantly interacting with and nurturing us (cf. the new *Works* 1:692). While Wesley (being an eighteenth-century man) did not use explicitly female imagery for expressing his understanding of God, it could be argued that some such usage is compatible with his basic concern.

An issue which the critics of female imagery of God usually try to mitigate is the impact of God-language on women’s (and men’s!) self-image (cf. Clanton, 66–94). The Christian tradition has always understood God-language to be reflexive; to take a key example, the doctrine of the Trinity not only enlightens us about God, it also defines the balance of Christian life in relation to God. As such, it is difficult to see how we can minimize (or eliminate) female imaging or naming of God while affirming that both male and female are in the “image of God.”

This brings us to the last major argument against incorporating more female God-language in Christian worship, the accusation that it represents an idolatrous capitulation to secular culture. This charge was explicitly lodged against the new *Book of Worship* in recent discussion. Some have argued from a comparative analysis of Methodist materials from the first half of this century with more recent publications, including the *Book of Worship*, that there has been a recent trend of phasing out Father-language for God. I do not question the existence of this trend so much as its significance. Does it reflect an idolatrous conforming to secular culture? Or, did the capitulation to culture take place earlier? An enlightening perspective on these questions can be gained by consulting the collections of prayers which Wesley provided his followers (in volume 11 of Jackson’s *Works*). These prayers use a wide variety of addresses to God, with only about a third being addressed to God as Father. The prayers and collects in his *Sunday Service of the Methodists in North America* (UM Publishing House, 1992) use “Father” even less because of their dependence on the Psalms. The proportionate use of “Father” in Wesley’s prayers would appear to compare well with the new *Book of Worship*! So why was there more frequent use of “Father” in Methodist materials earlier this century? Perhaps this dominance reflects Methodist participation in the cultural reaction to the decline of Victorian values in the late nineteenth century, a reaction that took the form of trying to “reclaim the Church for men” in conservative traditions (cf. DeBerg, 86ff). In other words, the accusation of conformity to culture may be as relevant for that period as for any time since!

To summarize, I believe that there is both biblical warrant and support in the Wesleyan tradition for enriching our language of worship and prayer with more female images and names for God. This is not to say that Father language or male imagery should be eliminated! All-or-nothing alternatives are inappropriate, on either side. We need to be reminded that God is Father, properly understood, precisely as a corrective to inadequate human fathering (cf. Tennis). But God is also Mother, Friend, Rock, and so on. None of these are sufficient characterizations of God, but properly understood all give authentic insight into God’s incomprehensible nature.

The repeated mention of proper understanding brings up a basic point. Too often these debates are carried on as if the goal is to find a set of God-language that avoids all misunderstanding. There is no such language! Any set of names or images can become an idol. Hence, the crucial task of pastors and teachers is not to defend a list of “PC-terms” (politically-correct or politically-conservative), but to help our communities become sensitive to the power and the limits of all God-language. Then perhaps we can recover the expansive range of God-language present in Scripture and Christian tradition.

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